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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on educators' collaborations among themselves and with parents in reforming schools to serve language minority students well. Examples are provided from the Program in Immigrant Education, a national program working to improve the education of immigrant students in secondary school. Specific attention is focused on the following: (1) the necessity of strong leadership in changing schools, and the importance of keeping language and culture on the reform agenda; (2) teacher inquiry and reflection, whereby teachers raise questions about students' success in school, gather and analyze data, and plan appropriate responses; (3) collaboration beyond the school, which includes collaborations with parents and the community; and (4) the change process, which is ongoing. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/VWL)

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# Language Minority Students in School Reform: The Role of Collaboration. ERIC Digest.

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# Digest

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## Language Minority Students in School Reform: The Role of Collaboration

*Carolyn Temple Adger, Center for Applied Linguistics*

Change is a constant for schools. Many factors contribute to a continuous modification of schools' missions and services: demographic shifts; new policy, curricula, and procedures created at the district and state levels; internal conditions and decisions by administrators, teachers, and students. However, the current reform movement promises to surpass previous change efforts by far. Encompassing a variety of initiatives for fundamental change in the way schools function to promote student success, this movement promises to affect everyone—students and teachers, principals and superintendents, parents and employers.

Like earlier drives for reform, the current one aims to improve students' academic achievement. The focus is on rethinking and restructuring schools to serve all students well (CPRE Policy Briefs, n.d.). Curriculum and instruction are being modified to challenge and engage all students and to articulate programs across grade levels. Central to this reform is the involvement of staff members in decision-making. This entails changing the way practitioners relate to each other, to administrators, to students, and to parents (Lieberman, 1995). Traditional hierarchical structures are giving way to more collaborative structures. The goal is to re-conceptualize and renew the school's total operation from within so that reform is tailored to local conditions and teachers are committed to what they have helped to craft (Weiss, 1995).

Can such fundamental change benefit all students, including those for whom English is not the primary language? Gandara (1994) warns that "while LEP [Limited English Proficient] and other "at risk" students are frequently cited as justifications for why reforms are needed, they are rarely included in any specific way in the reforms themselves" (p. 46). School reform measures hold as much promise for English language learners as for other students—but not without continuous, explicit attention to how these students' language skills, cultural backgrounds, and experiences uniquely shape the school's work.

This digest focuses on educators' collaborations among themselves and with parents in reforming schools to serve language minority students well. Examples come from the Program in Immigrant Education, a national program funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to improve the education of immigrant students in secondary school.

### Leadership in Changing Schools

While staff collaboration is being emphasized, strong leadership remains crucial to the change process (Wagner, 1994). As a culturally and linguistically diverse school works collaboratively to refine a shared vision of excellent schooling and an educational program that reflects it, the principal must continually advocate for the inclusion of English language learners (Goldenberg & Sullivan, 1994; Minicucci & Olsen, 1992). By explicitly keeping language and culture on the reform agenda and insisting that every teacher participate in the school's continuous improvement process, the principal can ensure sustained attention to these students.

### Teacher Inquiry

Reforming a school usually requires that the whole staff or significant groups within it take stock of their practices and devise new directions (Wagner, 1994). This may mean modifying traditional beliefs and practices to respond more accurately to students' learning needs. One useful mechanism for change is inquiry groups, in which teachers raise questions about students' success in their school, gather and analyze data, and plan responses (Joyce & Calhoun, 1995). California Tomorrow, a research, advocacy, and technical assistance organization, has led several schools through this process. Using data from the school districts' databases and others, they have identified a group of students that exhibits a high failure rate and limited progress in credit accumulation for graduation (California Tomorrow, 1995). These are immigrant students who have been in U.S. schools for some time, are orally fluent in English, and have exited the sequence of ESL and sheltered content courses, but are not doing well in mainstream courses. This finding has raised a number of questions for the schools: What language and academic needs of these students are not being addressed by the existing academic program? What does the program need in order to serve these students better? Responding has involved interviewing the students and their families to find out about their school experiences, adding additional courses to assure that the transition to mainstream courses is smoother, and monitoring this group of students closely. The school reform literature suggests other responsive practices that schools can tailor to their own needs and conditions (Macías & Ramos, 1995).

Teachers' inquiry may also focus on the "puzzlements" that teachers may experience when they do not share linguistic and cultural backgrounds with their students (Jacob, 1995, p. 451). Jacob suggests adding anthropological methods to reflective practice, an approach that promotes practitioners' critical review of their work (Schon, 1983). Working as anthropologists do, teachers identify a problem in terms of their own cultural knowledge about teaching and learning, closely observe (and perhaps record) the problematic situation over time, talk with students and others, and collect relevant documents, such as students' work. Analyzing data from the observations, interviews, and documents involves locating any disjunction between the teacher's expectations and the students' performance, developing an intervention, and monitoring its implementation by using these same methods. Teachers taking the class "World Englishes and their Speakers," taught by faculty from the University of Maryland Baltimore County, used some of these techniques in case studies of students whose first language was a variety of English not native to the United States. Analysis of recorded interviews allowed them to pinpoint contrasts between the

students' English and their own. These insights, along with studying research about the students' language and talking with community members from the students' country, helped teachers to understand better the relationships among varieties of English (Crandall, 1995). Combining a reflective perspective on school life with an anthropological focus can inform educators' collaborative efforts to incorporate language minority students into the school's continually evolving program (Trueba, 1989).

## Collaborating Beyond the School

Current views of reform also emphasize strengthening and transforming school relationships with parents and the community to make them more collaborative. Regardless of income or level of education, parents can support children's education—for example, by reading with them and talking about the text in the native language or in English. Even when parents' own level of literacy is low, they support their children's education when they encourage an inquiry approach to learning in the home. Through discussion with their children about events at home and in the community, parents can help students acquire important verbal skills that will help them to engage in instructional discourse and to become critical readers and consumers of information (Gandara, personal communication). Schools need to develop partnerships with parents that allow them to identify and validate such parental contributions to the shared task of educating students.

Thus far, the reform literature has little to say about successful collaborations involving schools and parents in linguistically and culturally diverse settings, despite well-known guidelines for their design: holding meetings in the community (not just at the school); choosing leaders who are at ease in both the school and the community; conducting meetings in the parents' primary languages; and informing parents about substantive and realistic contributions they can make to their children's education (Olsen, et al., 1994).

Similarly, the potential benefit of collaboration among culturally diverse communities and schools has not yet been fully realized. Social service organizations can be useful to both families and schools, offering health services to families of language minority students, for example, and organizing meetings where parents and educators exchange information. In Houston, where the Intercultural Development Research Association has a partnership with a middle school, a dinner event strengthened relationships among families, school staff, and a coalition of local businesses. In Prince George's County, MD, a number of community organizations, many affiliated with the Coalition for the Foreign Born, have sponsored forums for immigrant students and their parents on immigrants' legal rights concerning education and employment. At California State University Long Beach, The Center for Language Minority Education and Research has set up a Parent Leadership Institute that trains immigrant parents to take a leadership role in their children's schools and work collaboratively with school personnel to enhance school services for their children (Ramirez & Douglas, 1988).

## Time to Renew

Reforming schools to serve all students, including those who are learning English, takes time. Change has been characterized as a process (Fullan, 1991) that is incremental (Pechman & King, 1993), chaotic, and ongoing (Fullan, 1993). None of the elements that contribute to effective change is easily or quickly achieved. Building a collaborative professional community with strong, committed leadership; using teacher inquiry and reflection as vehicles for improving instruction and professional development; and inventing and preserving connections among the school, the parents, and the community—all of these must be seen as long-term, challenging processes.

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